



## Speculum Mundi: The world as Looking Glass

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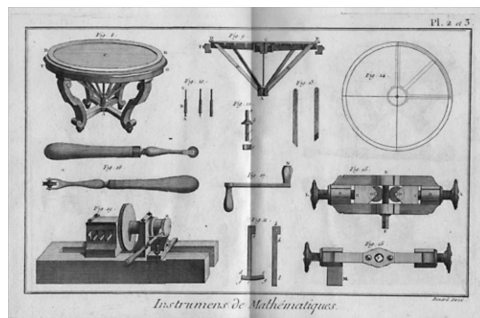
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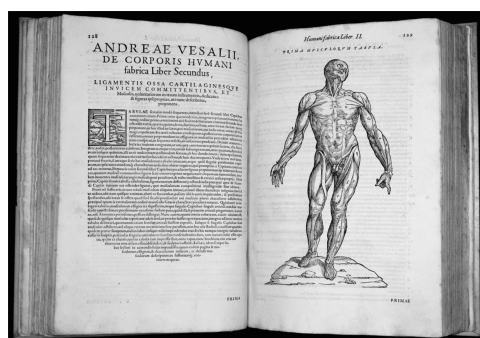
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## Speculum Mundi: The World as Looking Glass

The collecting mechanism of the encyclopedia has fascinated architects, artists, philosophers, bibliophiles and scientists for centuries. The search for an underlying structure to order our knowledge of the world, through the compilation of categories, strands and systems became the restless and obsessive quest of the enlightenment. Reason would become the guide to shape our scientific ability to collect, catalogue, and control the untamed wilderness of the natural world, and to map the shapeless contours of our speculative thought. Order and reason would form the intellectual prism through which everything in the world would be collected, understood and catalogued.

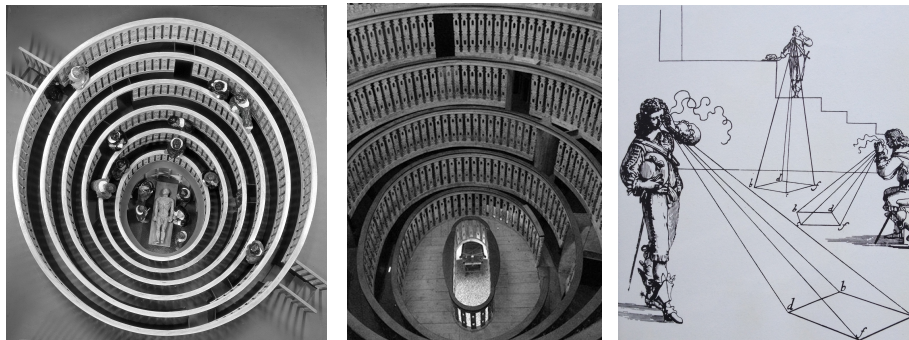


The paradigm of this was the reading of the human body as a Newtonian machine to be disassembled in the spectacle of the anatomical theatre. The hidden mechanisms, structures, systems, and layers of the body could be meticulously dissected, unraveled, and charted in the form of a book: the body atlas, such as *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* by Vesalius<sup>1</sup>. This seven volume exploration laid out the regions of the body like that of the territories of a new found land: anatomical ordinance.



Anatomical theatres (the words implying the necessity of the spectacle) such as that in Padua<sup>2</sup>, were constructed like spatial optic lenses, with their concentric circles designed for proximity and clarity of vision. The body was now placed at the centre, at the focus of this mechanism of enquiry. The vertical layering of the structure implied the shifting movement of the microscope's lens: probing into the depths of matter itself. It is interesting to consider Cern<sup>3</sup> -our most contemporary scientific machine- in a similar way, as a vast circle embedded in the earth searching for Dark Matter. The anatomical theatre symbolized the predicament of placing reason with

that of optic truth: a dualism of knowing and seeing. In Padua the anatomical theatre became the ultimate looking device. Each door to the next level was the exact measure of a standing figure. As you moved closer and closer to the cadaver on the dissection table, the portals and table were drawn into a dialogue of the horizontal and vertical; of death and life; of the unknown, and knowledge.



In so doing the anatomical theatre opened up a void into the overreaching belief that religion alone could provide the structuring origins of knowledge. Instead, truth now resided in the visible, in the optic. The world was now measured through vision, and that measure could be systematically catalogued. The world had been turned inside out and in the anatomical theatre we were viewing ourselves, looking at ourselves, taking ourselves apart, in order to find knowledge. The dark portals and spatial rings provided the perfect symbol of the world as looking glass; a void through which to find the omphalos of our own enquiry.

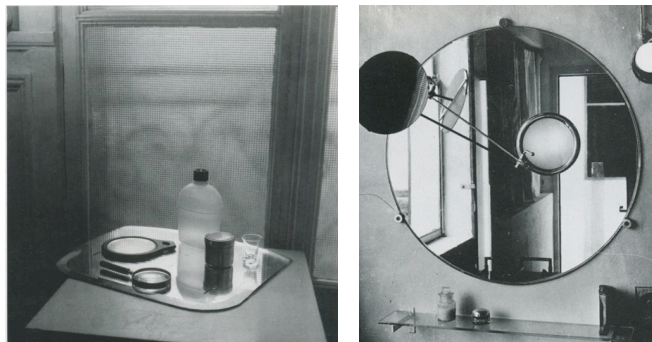
In 1635 John Swan's book *Speculum Mundi- Or A glasse representing the face of the world*<sup>4</sup> tried to explain the origins of the world systematically, by laying everything out within the framework of the hexameron. This fascination with the six days of creation, is strangely replicated in the layers of the anatomical theatre: a pure form holding at its centre the origins of its own creation. But it should be read more as a metaphor for concentric dualism; of dark and light, of the intertwined circles of rational and irrational thought. Try as it might the enlightenment's attempt to extract reason from belief, order from chaos, instead simply replicated the same equivocal structures in the devices and methods it deployed. The cataloguing of the world in the enlightenment by empirical reason, mirrored that of a similar indexing by biblical narrative. Much in the same way, the writer Jorge Luis Borges refers to *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* in his reference to '...a certain Chinese Encyclopedia'. Swan ends his book with a rational catalogue of the irrational: a catalogue of all creation:

*'A Table of the principall (sic) and most remarkable matters....'*

This epic parade of categories of time, seasons, creatures, episodes and events creates the most extraordinary attempt at deploying the rationality of the catalogue as device over that of belief. The world for Swan had become a vast list and index, which could be assembled and referenced in perfect order. Everything had a place, and for Swan this order enjoyed the freedom of a magical and lyrical narrative,

concealed behind the precision and mask of reason. If creation could be ordered and mapped, then the transposition of the sacred and mythic forms of knowledge into that of the scientific encyclopedia, was complete.

It has been said that artists remake the world in order to know it, and that this philosophical quest takes shape unknowingly in constantly repeating their own image. Each portrait or painting, is in a sense, a reflection of themselves, and each object, painting and fabrication is cloaked in artifice, in order to hide the essence of their own repeating narratives. The looking glass is at the heart of all artistic practice.



There is a relatively unknown photograph by Eileen Gray of a series of vessel, optic devices, and glasses placed on a mirror, which in turn sits on a table in a room. It has rarely appeared in publications of her work, and then only as part of a series of other photographs. It is important to note the value Eileen Gray placed on her photographic work, though lesser known, and less discussed than her architecture and furniture, it is key in understanding her approach, and in particular the way she meticulously used it in cataloging her work.

In the photograph the glass screen behind the table echoes visually the sense of the optic. An interference pattern on the screen sets the other vessels into an implied sense of rotation and movement. But should this photograph be viewed as just a photographic still life of found objects, or is it intended as a direct reference to the world considered as a looking glass?

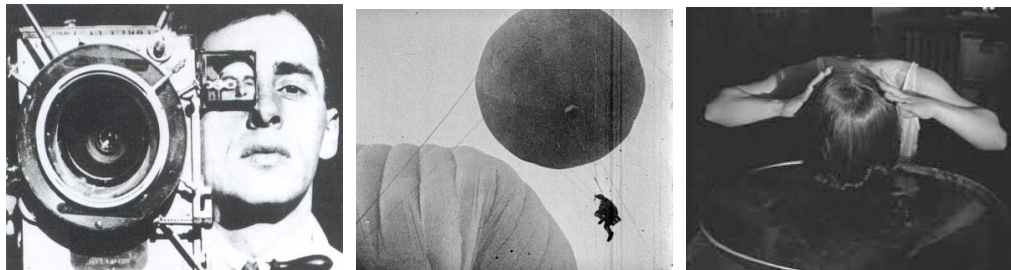
The arrangement would make a beautiful drawing seen from above, in that the placement of the objects are located very specifically in relation to each other. Each vessel or optic device is reflected in the mirror below, signaling a space beyond the limits of the table. The vessels, glass and mirror play out an intense sense of looking at each other, which is caught by the photographers eye (invisible), and in turn our own as the viewer (voyeur). The mirror designed for the villa E1027<sup>5</sup> by Gray, repeats this arrangement, but flips it vertically. The table is now replaced by a wall to hold the looking glass, and the objects become orbiting small circular mirrors moving in relation to the larger circular mirror. Reflecting, magnifying and framing, the gaze is continually moving. In Gray's photograph of the mirror, a window is caught in the reflection, through which we imagine (but can't see) the Mediterranean. The window and mirror are deliberately fused together compositionally. We are looking, at looking, but the face of the world remains unseen.





The origins of the mirror begins in the aqueous. Pools of water reflect the passing world and the shifting clouds above. We look down, in order to look up. Vessels were used to contain and shape of the fluid gaze. It is no coincidence that the glass-makers of Murano in Venice, surround by the lagoon, were the first to develop the skills to manufacture the mirror: bringing their craft of metalwork and glasswork together in an alchemical fusion.

Historically the presence of a mirror in a house was a rare thing, and considered almost magical in how it was experienced. But mirrors are everywhere now and we no longer need them for our obsessive digital self-gazing. In our phones the camera lens has merged with the mirror surface of the glass, to fuse into a self-conscious reciprocity of looking and being looked at. But our first encounter as a child at a mirror is deeply memorable. It shocks us into a Lacanian<sup>6</sup> sense of separation: we are alone, standing with ourselves in the space of the looking glass.



If cinema should be considered the ultimate form of looking glass, then Andrey Tarkovsky's film *Mirror*<sup>7</sup> (1974), awakens in us the possibilities of seeing the world anew through it. In what Will Self has described as possibly the most beautiful film ever made, it is part catalogue of memories, part cinematic encyclopedia, a collection of poems, a play of dreams, of films within films; it collects the world by looking at it again, and reflecting that looking back at us through an array of vessels, mirrors and reflections.

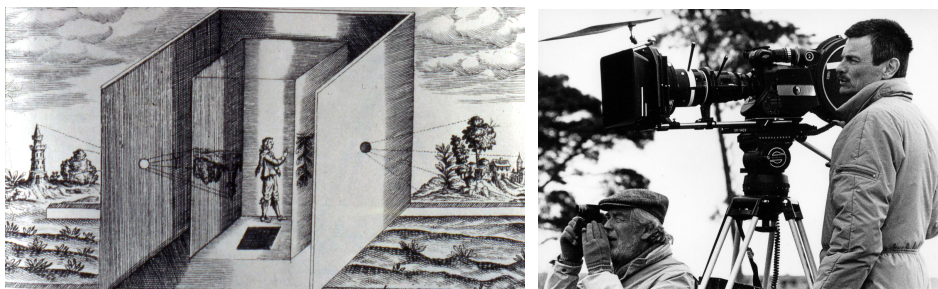
We are never quite sure what we are looking at; what is real; what is remembered; what is imagined. Through each carefully constructed sequence, the film unfolds through a different sense of time, slowly weaving together the beautiful images into a kaleidoscopic journey. We are pulled deeper and deeper into the space of the lens, where filmic time begins to hold and re-structure our thoughts and observations. Are we the stuttering boy jolted into realization and words by an induced hypnotic trance at the start of the film; or one of the children looking out to the edge of the

forest for their father through their dreams; or running breathless with the proofreader to catch a possible mistake before the book is printed? The episodes are not from any typical linear narrative, but fall naturally into meaning and significance by their own implied order, and by the projection of our own meanings onto them.



Tarkovsky has described the difficulty in editing the film, of making sense of the diversity of the material, and of almost abandoning it until the final attempt at editing brought it together in a way that allowed the film to find its own order. Through the filmic looking glass, the Russian landscape, the imagery, the characters, and the poems, which are unknown to us, become wonderfully and strangely familiar. We feel as if our childhood has somehow been recovered in the film and rewound in the fragmentary sequences of our own thoughts, and caught in the darkness of each mirror that flickers and glows in diurnal time.

The imagery is that of the stillness of a painting, brought to the physical materiality of film: a chemical transformation in the inversion of image by light through a lens. The camera obscura, which was often used by painters, has in Tarkovsky's cinematic work become through the camera the space to re-appropriate the world of painting back into cinema.



The connections between things in the film, are our own, as we step out of traditional narrative and look into our own memories for the evocations of the things seen, loved, and imagined: Leonardo's drawings, a burning bush, a library scattered on a floor, a gust of wind across a field, the evaporating condensation of a breath on a mirror, a bird set to flight from the hand of a dying man.



We float beyond gravity with the riders of barrage balloons, trudge through the mud with the Russian Army crossing Lake Sivash, or watch the faces of children escaping the bombings of the Spanish Civil War. Footage of actual events are embedded in the film as a series of newsreels, in order to combine individual memories with that of wider historical significance. Poetry, facts and dreams are catalogued together, and reconfigured lyrically into a filmic encyclopedia of memory.

The camera's movement is as much the narrative of the film as that of any of the actors or events. In one of the most beautiful sequences in the film the camera moves slowly in a circular motion, a panorama, while water pours down from the ceiling and across the walls, marking a veil of mystery to the limits of the space, and that of filmic time. The camera is looking at the surfaces peeling away; through windows into a seemingly limitless darkness; at reflections of reflections; catching the glimmer of raindrops on a window; and to witness mirrors looking at mirrors.

The actress playing Tarkovsky's mother looks into a mirror and we watch as the director's own frail mother emerges in the view of another mirror on the other side of the room. Beauty has caught its own image, and we are moved as we look back into a different depth of time. She looks out at us with a wisdom that only age can bring, and touches the surface of the looking glass with her hand? We have entered the ethereal space of cinema and memory, beyond any linear logic, and closer to witnessing the uncertain shape of our own consciousness.



In *Mirror*, Tarkovsky's has collected our gaze, and shown us great beauty in the memories of the ordinary and simple things of life. His memories are now our memories, which have become transformed through film, and which have been meticulously gathered and catalogued through the process of montage. *Mirror* is a beautiful filmic encyclopedia that looks deep into ourselves, and reveals who we are, in the episodic shimmer of time and imagery across the looking glass of the world.

Paul Clarke

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1 Andreas Vesalius was Professor of Anatomy at the University of Padua. His most important work, *De humani corporis fabrica* was published in 1543.

2 The University of Padua has one of the world's earliest anatomical theatres. Andreas Vesalius, whose *De humani corporis fabrica* makes reference to a theatre in the city. It was the anatomist Girolamo Fabrici D'Acquapendente who took the initiative of having a permanent anatomical theatre built in Padua. It was inaugurated in 1595 and remained in use until 1872.

3 The Cern Laboratory and tunnel is located 100 meters underground in the region between Geneva International Airport and the Jura district. It forms a giant unseen circle underground.

4 This book written by John Swan was published in Cambridge in 1635. The full title is: *Speculum mundi- Or A glasse(sic) representing the face of the world shewing (sic) both that it did begin, and must also end: the manner how, and time when, being largely examined. Whereunto is joined an hexameron, or a serious discourse of the causes, continuance, and qualities of things in nature; occasioned as matter pertinent to the work done in the six days of the worlds creation.*

5 The Villa E1027 was designed by Eileen Gray with Jean Badovici's and was built between 1926-1929 at Roquebrune. Gray's documentation of the villa and the furniture in her 'portfolio' uses photography to carefully catalogue and draw each component, plan and element in as sequential way.

6 The "mirror stage" is an important part of Lacan's critical interpretation of the work of Freud. Lacan argues that children pass through a phase in which the image of the body (reflected in a mirror) produces a psychic sense of the independent self. Of and 'I' as appose to combined mother and child. This image however is out of step with the child's own development and as such is abstracted into an ideal to which they strive to achieve.

7 *Mirror* was made between 1973-74. It was Andrey Tarkovsky's fourth film. The film was initially rejected by Goskino (USSR State Committee for Cinematography) on the basis that it was incomprehensible to due its lack of structure and editing.